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ABSTRACT

Among personal memories for one minority instructor in literature is witnessing the civil rights movement, that defining period in which people of African descent broke out of the chrysalis of "Jim Crow" and transformed themselves from "colored" to "Black." In 1995, 1,000,000 Black men once again converged on the Capitol in a nonviolent movement toward civil rights. The three decades between that march and the 1963 March on Washington provide a convenient time span for the instructor to reflect on the usefulness of the academic community, which has depicted itself as the bastion of liberality and tolerance. In good part, however, universities are reflective of the attitudes that form the racist understructure of the nation. The federal government has, since George Bush was President, systematically withdrawn funding for financial assistance aimed at non-White students. Serving as the only woman and the only non-White in a group of five tenured professors on a department search committee for a Renaissance dramatist specialist left the instructor with the realization that this exclusive, "secret society"--the search committee--was a microcosm of the department, reflective of the academy's hegemonic ideal. Realistically, non-White literatures are not valued as necessary components to an understanding of the development of world language and culture. To be a minority professor, or a professor of minority literatures, is to live with an awareness that although that literature embodies a wisdom that might do a great deal to heal the United States, it is almost impossible to make it a valued part of the curriculum. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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Decoding Mixed Signals:

Survival in the Demise of Affirmative Action

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I. Life Between the Marches

In August of 1963 my father, Henry Irving Mayson, attended the March on Washington. I remember with crystal clarity pressing my face against the cool screen of our boxy black and white television and searching the crowds with a child's eyes, certain that I would see him, there among the throng in front of the Lincoln Memorial. An Episcopal priest, my father had traveled to Washington on a bus loaded with Black people from our church, and to me their pilgrimage seemed fabulous, meaningful, almost mythical.

My father's journey to Washington took on even more meaning when exactly one year later our family moved into an all-white suburb of Akron, Ohio, where I was to be the first, and the only African-American to attend the local public school for much of my elementary education.

For my family, the dream of equality through racial integration quickly became surreal. "For Sale" signs appeared magically on front lawns up and down our block. Bricks were thrown through our living room window on Saturday nights; the gas and electric meters on our house were tampered with, and late one night my father caught a would-be "terrorist" in our garage. My father bought a handgun and began

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sleeping with it under his pillow. He then purchased a rifle and put a six-foot high fence around our backyard. He drove me to school every day, picked me up for lunch and drove me back again, only to return two hours later to take me home at the close of the school day. There were very few homes where I was allowed to play, and very few children whose parents made me welcome.

Yet we stayed, and I grew, developing sophisticated "strategies for coping with my outsider status" (Evans 508). By the time I was eight or nine I knew how to look into adults' eyes to determine their reaction to me as a Black child. I had also learned from my parents to speak confidently about the needs and ideals of my people, for I was often called upon to act, in bell hooks' words, as a "native informant" (43). I remember trying to explain the purpose of the "Negro demonstrations" to my all-white, fifth-grade class, while the white teacher stood idly by. I also remember my mother's tears after Kennedy was assassinated, her disgust after Malcolm X was gunned down, and the palpable terror in our kitchen the evening I told her what I had just heard on the news: that Martin Luther King had been shot in Memphis and was not expected to live.

I was, in short, a witness to that defining period in which people of African descent broke out of the chrysalis of Jim Crow and transformed themselves from "colored" to "Negro" to "Afro-American" to "Black." I was a child of the Civil Rights Movement, a living example of the great social experiment called "integration," America's first modern impulse toward "affirmative action."

Looking back on those years, it seems that for a fleeting instant we grasped the truth behind James Baldwin's observation that "the story of the Negro in America is the story of America." Although Baldwin was writing specifically about African-Americans, the "Negro" in his statement might have been a member of any oppressed and marginalized racial group. At the core of the Civil Rights Movement was a remarkable commitment to making something positive come out of our painfully

divisive racial history, a real imperative toward understanding and accepting our shared humanity, regardless of our ethnic or racial heritage.

Tragically, the early optimistic days of the Civil Rights Movement did not recognize the need to examine what wounds still bled from centuries of enslavement, poverty, ignorance, ill-health, addiction, war, sexism and pure racism. The nation was in no way prepared to consider and honor the experience of the 'Other.' This "non-comprehension" of the realities of life for non-whites in the United States in many ways remains one of the salient features of American culture, one of the defining features of the myth of the melting pot, in which individualized ethnic and racial identity is sublimated in favor of a larger ideal.

On October 16, 1995, a million Black men (and women) once again converged on the Capitol in a non-violent movement toward Civil Rights. This time, however, the "dream" was not one of integration and social acceptance; it was instead based on a segregated and exclusionist vision of communal healing through a simplistic male narcissism. The crowd was not urged to strive toward the bourgeois standards of the white community; the men were instead directed toward healing themselves and their communities.

The Million Man March proved, more than any particular social event of the past three decades, how cynical and disbelieving African-Americans have become in the ideals of the Civil Rights Movement. Many of us who witnessed the march of 1963 would never have believed ourselves willing to tolerate the march of 1995 as a last-ditch effort to save not only the Black male, but to rescue some sense of our racial identity as Medicare, Medicade, Welfare and Affirmative Action - the last legal structures of the Civil Rights era, are destroyed.

II. The Blindness Within the Academy

Ironically, the three decades between the two marches provide us with a convenient time span to reflect upon the usefulness of the academic community, which for decades depicted itself as the bastion of liberality and tolerance. It was on college campuses that the early, bitter battles for the implementation of desegregation took place. Universities were the incubators for the social-protest and anti-war movements that fleshed out the ideals of the sixties. University students made Freedom Summer a reality; our college campuses fueled debates on radical sexual and gender politics that later became the Feminist Movement. Black campuses in the South gave us leaders whose ideals formed a spectrum from a pro-integrationist stance to Black nationalism, while white universities in the North began to recognize the excellence of non-white academics. Eventually, universities throughout the United States began to create programs aimed at redressing the inadequacies of curricula that ignored non-white voices. Universities continue to provide a forum for writers and social critics, from Amiri Baraka to Henry Louis Gates to bell hooks.

Yet universities are also deeply reflective of the attitudes that form the racist under structure of the American nation. The federal government has, since George Bush, systematically withdrawn funding for financial assistance aimed at non-white students. It was almost exactly a year before the Million Man March that affirmative action programs were voted down by the Regents of UCLA. And upon presenting a proposal for a new course on the "Literature of the Civil Rights Movement" to the English department of the university where I am a professor, one my colleagues, himself an expert in literature of the Holocaust, asked: "Heather, was there *really* a Civil Rights Movement? What in the world would you teach in such a course?"

To those of us who have completed Masters and Doctoral work in the field of multicultural literatures, questions such as these are both amusing and heartbreaking. I admire my colleague for his candor. But to be asked to justify the validity of one's own literary record, the record that mirrors, probes, defines and illustrates one's racial and social experience in the United States -- is in itself proof that perhaps the Civil Rights Movement only exists in the minds of the marginalized.

I recently had the opportunity to serve on a departmental search committee for a Renaissance-dramatist. As the only woman and the only non-white in the group of five tenured professors, I listened and watched as the business of department-building occurred before my eyes. Our search committee brought levity to the tedious process of considering over four-hundred applications by making jokes about Shakespeare, the Renaissance, and life within the academy. Closeted for long hours, I listened to my colleagues quoting obscure passages from obscure works of European literature, debating the critical positions of other scholars, and commenting on the writing of the job candidates.

As the days wore on, I realized that this exclusive, "secret" society -- the search committee -- was a true microcosm of our department, clearly reflective of the academy's hegemonic ideal. Even as my colleagues shared jokes about Milton and Spenser, I knew they would be incapable of understanding the complex interdependency between Ernest Gaines' white and Black characters, or as Gates describes it, the "signifying mimesis and diegesis" (218) of Ishmael Reed's writing, or the Africanisms that inform Morrison's Beloved.

As fate would have it, each of the minority applicants we invited for an interview had already been approached by numerous, larger institutions. We finally hired a white male for the position. Despite the most honorable intentions of our committee, our faculty of over one-hundred professors, instructors, lecturers and teaching assistants still has only four people of color.

I remain a "native informant," still charged with the challenge of proving that Black literature is not -- to quote Stanley Crouch, "stuck out on some distant sidetrack in a railway yard" (New Yorker 100). Foregrounding my department's stated mission of establishing an environment of diversity lies a deeply embedded imperative, with certain members of the faculty, to preserve the dominance of the canonical tradition. When the occasion for multicultural discourse arises it is quickly discounted; this was clearly evidenced to me when a colleague recently suggested that given a textbook, "anyone could teach multicultural literature."

Having been relegated to the ghetto of "diversity appointments," my true qualifications as a university professor become moot. The process of self-justification in which I am forced to engage becomes ironic proof, not of my pride in the validity of the African-American literary tradition, but of my shame in my presupposed scholarly inferiority. As Jennifer M. Russell has written, the "diversity candidate" will be

> treated like an intellectual waif. She cannot legitimately claim any special competence or expertise in any subject or field. Her considered judgments regarding course coverage, teaching methodology, examining and grading can be challenged with impunity. Brave colleagues can query of her: "So, how does it feel not knowing whether you were appointed to our faculty because of affirmative action or because of your qualifications?" (501).

The prevailing insistence upon the inferiority of non-white literary traditions, and their instructors, facilitates the construction of a "neocanon," purged of the constraints of integrationist challenges and heteroglossic notions. In a cynical sense, the current demise of legal "affirmative action" would seem to herald the end of three decades of placating the insatiable desires of the 'Other.' In a tragic sense, it

would appear that the Civil Rights Movement has at last truly ended, and not far from where it began.

Race becomes, in Morrison's words, "both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" (7). Perhaps, and this is an unsettling thought indeed, it is necessary that I must remain "marginalized," no matter how brilliant my scholarship, how effective my teaching, and how useful my service to the university community, in order to provide a fool-proof "other" to contrast with the Eurocentric academic tradition.

III. Decoding Mixed Signals

Those of us in tenure-track positions within the academy are currently in the business of decoding mixed signals. Often hired to teach the courses born in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, we are watching with anger and dismay as the tides turn and we are, once again, judged not by our real capabilities, but rather by our perceived "usefulness" in the perpetuation of the conservative academic system. It is with sadness that we realize how deeply the roots of tradition still determine the growth of our curricula, and how little value the academy places on the social relevance of what we teach.

Ideally, each new generation of scholars within the past two decades should have been trained to know and appreciate the literature of marginalized groups, even as we non-white scholars have been required to show competence in the various historical periods and genres of English literature. Ideally, non-white authors should have been incorporated into the teaching of these periods and genres, rather than being segregated as "minority" literatures to be taught in separate classes.

Ideally, the recent critical acclaim for Asian and Native American authors, as well as the rising cognition of African and Afro-Caribbean literature should be used to supply us with new and non-traditional readings of the canon, as well as the possibility to round out the historical inaccuracies and inadequacies of past curricula.

Realistically, however, these literatures are not valued as necessary components to an improved understanding of the development of world language and culture. A "holistic" view of world culture has never been the goal of our system, which remains dominated by the tacit ghost of the American Adam (Lewis 7), freed of all the cultural, historical and moral "baggage" of an Old World, European tradition left far behind.

I have had the privilege of studying in that Old World; while completing my graduate and post graduate studies at universities in Paris and Zurich I had the opportunity to look at our American system from without, and to carefully consider my position as an American, a Black American and as a woman.

At the University of Zurich I learned that my student peers were only admitted to the university when they showed an oral and written competence in *two* modern foreign languages *and* one classical language. All students in the college of Science and Arts were required to display a mastery of Latin. And students of English Literature had to pass qualifying examinations in Old English, Phonetics and Linguistics.

When I began my Master's work in Comparative Literature, I found myself in classrooms where the spoken language was German, but where we read texts in French, Latin, Italian and English -- and never in translation. Several years later, upon researching my doctoral dissertation on the poetry of African-American slaves, I was amazed at the range of literature on the trans-Atlantic slave trade available in Swiss libraries.

It is indeed possible for a culture to give equal consideration to other cultures; it is even preferable to welcome the scholarship of worlds outside one's own. It is, finally, necessary to know and value those who live within and without. I have had the privilege of experiencing a more genuinely multicultural academy than the American academy; I believe that our academic environments can become the models and sanctuaries of true cultural diversity.

But I have now come home to the United States and become part of a conservative academic tradition that is likely to outlive me. I was hired as an Assistant Professor of English because of my experience in the outside world, and yet I am daily confronted with an overwhelming sense that my students, and quite often my colleagues, would be much more comfortable with me if I conformed entirely to their stereotypical notion of a "Black Literature" professor. Too rarely do I have the opportunity to incorporate my experiences in Europe or the Caribbean, where I taught at the University of the Virgin Islands, into my American classroom. This is clearly a waste of my training as an instructor, and a loss to my students.

So what are the signals I am asked to decode? First, I am expected to be like my colleagues, with a wide-ranging appreciation of canonical literature, a strong respect for the current educational norms, and a firm belief in the academic system. I am not, however, expected to question the relevance or the validity of the content of our curriculum in relation to non-white American societies. There would be little tolerance for my suggestion that our pedagogical methods are often no more effective in instructing the marginalized student than the SAT is a true measure of intelligence.

Second, I am expected to participate in department activities in the areas of committee work, attendance at workshops and teaching seminars, and campus-wide programs. I often find, as a matter of fact, that my presence on some committees is requested, not because of my knowledge or expertise, but because a minority

participant is required, as was the case with the search committee I discussed above. While expected to attend meetings and participate in discussions, I am not expected to insist upon my perspective as a Black woman -- in fact, too much mention of my race or gender is quickly perceived as an unwelcome militancy.

Third, comes that question of tenure. Fortunately, I am employed at a university with a strong union and a clearly defined union contract. Points toward tenure are awarded for various scholarly and pedagogical activities, including participation at conferences. Tenure is granted when a certain number of points has been obtained.

The problem with this system is that a select committee within the department is charged with determining how many points each of the tenure candidate's activities are worth, and the members of my tenure committee will be drawn from our linguistic, composition and children's literature programs. There will be no African-Americanist on the committee when I apply for tenure. Under such circumstances, can my application be fairly evaluated?

I am firmly committed to the idea that students who are preparing themselves for professional lives desperately want, and need, to take courses that help them to deal effectively with people from other ethnic groups. Aside from the fact that my Introduction to African-American Literature course is a cross-disciplinary study of history, sociology, political science, gender theory, music, art, filmmaking, oral traditions, drama, poetry and the novel, I also provide a forum for communication between the black and white students on my campus. I cannot understate the importance of my function as mediator and mentor; I am well aware that my course has a very important, and very specific capacity to heal some of the distrust and confusion that the students experience both in their campus lives and in the world beyond. Time and time again, in student evaluations, personal notes and letters, and even in visits to my office, students have expressed their excitement over the

subjects we discuss and the texts we read, and their deep satisfaction in finally being given a vision of American life from another point of view.

To be a minority professor, or to be a professor of minority literatures, is to live with a awareness that although our literature embodies a wisdom that might do a great deal to heal the nation in which we live, it is almost impossible to make that literature a valued part of the curriculum. Like Sisyphus, we push hard to assert ourselves during those elusive periods where Civil Rights seem real and affirmative actions seize the day, then we watch as the nation rolls backward into conservatism, and we again become the tolerated.

I suppose that in the tradition of Camus, those of us who find some satisfaction within the academy have learned to work very hard, very fast, and very forcefully whenever the opportunity permits. We take those students who want to learn more about our disciplines and do everything within our powers to open their minds, so that they will learn to love learning, and so that their learning will never cease. And those of us who have lived long enough to see Civil Rights and feminism reincarnate themselves as Affirmative Action and multiculturalism, are determined to find the manner to survive to teach the next generation, regardless of the name the academy chooses to grant us, in the true spirit of what universities sometimes have been, and what I know that universities can be.

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